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The Real Food Chain
Food Chain Workers Alliance are strengthening the forgotten link

By Joann Lo

Deeathrice Jimerson works in warehouses outside of Chicago. Chicago is a major logistics hub, the only place in North America where six Class I railroads (the largest type of railroad) meet, connecting all corners of the continent. In the fall of 2010, Dee was hired by the temporary work agency Reliable Staffing and sent to work at a Walmart warehouse run by a subcontractor called Schneider Logistics.

“Thiss company told me when I got hired I was getting paid $10 an hour and then they changed that too ‘production’ without giving me a note.” “Production” means that Dee and his co-workers were paid $10 for each large pallet of goods that they unloaded from shipping trucks. Sometimes, that $10 had to be shared by all of the workers who were unloading the trucks. These rates rarely added up to minimum wage or overtime pay as required by labor laws. So Dee and other workers filed a class action lawsuit against the temp agency in February 2011. The next day, Dee was told not to return to work.

This is not unique. Temporary work, low wages and wage theft are now the norm in the warehouse industry.

In another warehouse, the company also paid “by production rate,” but this time it meant for every “5,000 boxes you move off this truck, this truck is only worth $62. There is no way you can finish a 5,000-box truck in 8 hours,” Dee said during a December 2011 retreat with other worker leaders in the food system. “So that means by my production rate, I’m working 8 hours per day for $62 per truck. And then I come back tomorrow and I still gotta work this truck. And it is still $62 a truck. So I am working today for free, basically. Seven hours, for free, for this day.”

Plant, grow, harvest, process, ship, sell, cook, and serve

The situation of Dee and warehouse workers in the Chicago area is very much like that of workers throughout the food chain. Close to 20 million people in the US work in the food system. They join millions more around the world who plant, grow, harvest, process, ship, sell, cook, and serve food. Frontline food workers often lack job security, are paid low or sub-minimum wages and face unsafe and unhealthy working conditions.

It’s no secret that the food system is broken. Less known is that it’s also corrupt. Walmart controls one-third of the US grocery market and for most major food products, just three or four corporations control the entire market. Billions of taxpayers’ dollars annually go towards commodity crops like corn, soy and wheat, while independent fruit and vegetable farmers fight for basically pennies. The corporate

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consolidation in the food system and its undue influence over policy makers have led to fewer family farmers and small food businesses, cheaper unhealthy food, and contamination of our water and land.

In response, the food justice movement has grown substantially in the past decade and has made wonderful advances in the growth of community gardens, urban agriculture and food access.

This corruption in the food system has also led to the exploitation of food workers. The issues facing food-system workers have not received as much attention from food justice activists. Sustainable food should include sustainable jobs for the people who work in the food system.

In a survey of 319 warehouse workers, Warehouse Workers for Justice found that 63% were temporary hires. And the median hourly wage for a temp worker was $9.00/hour, $3.48/hour less than directly hired workers.

From an analysis of data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, we found that the average wage for a frontline food worker is just $9.90 per hour, with an average annual salary of $18,900, substantially lower than the poverty level for a family four, which is $22,350. And workers are still subjected to racist and discriminatory treatment. Not surprisingly, whites dominate high-wage jobs, and white men earn the highest wages of all race and gender groups.

Justice from farm to plate

To challenge the corporate control of the food system, educate the food justice movement, and improve wages and working conditions for food workers, the Restaurant Opportunities Centers (ROC) United in January of 2008 convened a number of worker centers and unions and in May 2008 brought together eight organizations at the Labor Notes Conference in Detroit. The Food Chain Workers Alliance was officially formed in July of 2009.

The alliance is a unique national coalition that includes creative, cutting-edge unions, worker centers and workers' rights advocacy organizations representing workers in the food system from farm to plate — in agriculture, food processing, meatpacking, logistics and warehouse, food service and restaurant, and grocery. Our 13 member groups represent a collective membership of almost 160,000 workers of all races. The members include:

Brandworkers International, CATA — the Farmworkers Support Committee, the Center for New Community, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the International Labor Rights Forum, Just Harvest USA, Northwest Arkansas Workers' Justice Center, the Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York, ROC United, UFCW Local 338.

For information and grant guidelines, write to:
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Members and organizers from Food Chain Workers Alliance groups. Dee is in the front row farthest to the right.
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770, UFCW Local 1500, UNITE HERE Food Service Division and Warehouse Workers for Justice.

How we do it
The alliance’s work is organized into four program areas:

Leadership development and solidarity. We organize annual worker leaders’ retreats that bring together workers from throughout the food chain to share experiences and strategies, learn new skills, and take action in support of each other. For example, in March 2011, over 20 workers and organizers from alliance member groups went to Florida to participate in a day-long march and rally with the tomato farm workers of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Afterwards, Luis DeLeon, a restaurant worker from Chicago, said, “I think I had a real awakening. Every time I see a tomato, I’ll think about who picked this, who distributed this, and were they treated fairly. I’ll remember this weekend my whole life.”

Campaigns. The industries of agriculture, food production, processing, distribution, retail and service sold over $1.8 trillion dollars in goods and services in 2007. That was 13.2% of GDP that year. But, according to the Kellogg Foundation, only 2% of the food consumed in the US is organic or sustainably produced. So, with close to 20 million people working in the US food system, food workers have the potential to build tremendous collective power to transform the food system into one that is sustainable, not only in terms of the environment and public health, but also sustainable for workers.

Policy and standards. We are preparing the first-ever comprehensive report on the state of US food workers that will include policy recommendations to increase protections and standards for food workers. We need to hear the workers’ voices in their own words, so the foundation of this report is over 600 surveys of food workers collected mostly by workers themselves in 2011. The report will be released at a special Food Workers & Food Justice conference on June 6, 2012, in New York City. Dee, the warehouse worker from the Chicago area, attended our training that we held in Immokalee, Florida, after we marched with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. He learned how to conduct the surveys and how to train other workers to do so. Dee then went back home to become the volunteer survey coordinator for his organization, Warehouse Workers for Justice. Dee did such a good job, in fact, that WWJ was the first organization to reach its target number of surveys.

Education and communications. We have developed an educational curriculum that you can download from our website and are now creating a short video with testimonies of workers from throughout the food supply chain – we will see and hear from workers like Dee and many others telling their own stories.

The future of the food system
On May 4, 2012, at this year’s Labor Notes conference, we plan to publicly launch a coordinated workers organizing campaign with three to four member organizations that are organizing workers in different segments of the food supply chain for a major multinational corporation, as well as direct employees of this corporation. This type of campaign involving workers in multiple points of a supply chain has never before been won. We have no illusions that this will be an easy fight, but we also know that with many industries, and the food system especially, subcontracting is used as a tool to race to the bottom. We have to be able to organize across a supply chain in order to build the power needed to stop the exploitation of workers.

We know from history that social change happens when those who are oppressed and marginalized organize together, build strong coalitions, and take direct action. We are using these lessons to build and develop the power of the Food Chain Workers Alliance. In addition to being a coalition ourselves, we also are a member of the Domestic Fair Trade Association and the US Food Sovereignty Alliance. In the long term, we hope to become an international alliance, as the food system is a global system.

I believe we are at an historic moment—the food justice movement is growing. More and more people are thinking about where their food comes from and looking for local, healthy, sustainably grown food. Now we are connecting them to the people, the workers that bring the food to their plate.

Joann Lo is the executive director of the Food Chain Workers Alliance, a RESIST grantee. www.foodchainworkers.org
Many Farms, One Movement
An Interview with Dena Hoff

Dena Hoff is a pretty busy person. In Eastern Montana, right on the Yellowstone River, Dena took a break from working on her farm to chat with RESIST. With her husband, Dena has been farming here since 1979. Farming is only one her passions though—she is also the North American co-chair of the international movement known as La Via Campesina, which is comprised of “millions of peasants, small and medium-size farmers, landless people, women farmers, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the world.” Dena is also the vice president of the National Family Farm Coalition, the indispensable “link of grassroots organizations working on family farm issues” in the US.

RESIST: Describe the state of the American farmer today. How have conditions changed? How have farmers had to adapt?

Dena Hoff (DH): I would guess that many of them have chosen a different line of work. Less than 1% of the US population is farmers.

We haven’t had decent agriculture or food policy since about 1986. If we are really serious about having a sustainable food supply in this country, then we have to have a guarantee of price. Farmers have to know they will be able to pay their bills at the end of the year and we don’t ever know that.

Scarcity is what fills the market. That’s how they make money.

Though, there is good news. Between 2007 and now there are 130,000 new small farmers, mostly organic, many of whom are women—which is heartening.

RESIST: How do you account for the recent rise of farmers?

DH: People in my generation, I’m 64 and my husband is 65, we grew up on a farm. I had grandparents who were farmers. We grew up with good food. And we know what it tastes like and so we always wanted good food. Since we couldn’t find it, we always just grew it ourselves. And people who come here like the food we have and then want to grow the same food.

They don’t want pink slime, they don’t want genetically modified food, they want to know what is in their food and who is growing it. They want to know it’s safe, they want to be able to feed it to their children. With all the diseases there are—obesity, heart disease, diabetes—people want to control the food that they eat. And they sure don’t trust the government—and why should they—especially in the case of GMOs. They didn’t tell us that the FDA or the USDA or the EPA didn’t actually test anything before they certified GMO crops for release. They took the company’s word that it was safe and it’s never been independently tested to see what effect it has on air, water, insects, on animals or even on humans. We are just guinea pigs, and people are tired of being guinea pigs.

People want to know what they are putting into their mouth, where it’s grown, how it’s grown and by whom. That is why a lot of people are growing gardens, going to farmer’s markets; they are making relationships directly with farmers and with urban gardeners—because they want to know what they are eating.

RESIST: Who are the big players? Who are we up against?

DH: Cargill and ConAgra are two of the biggest food companies. You would be hard pressed to buy a Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner that didn’t have everything on your menu coming from one of them.

Monsanto is the number one seed company in the world. Other ones are Dupont, Syngenta, Land O’Lakes.

These companies have the ear of the government and under the guise of food safety, can pass legislation that makes it harder for us to produce. That is what they have been doing—saying that food for farmer’s markets and for direct marketing is unsafe, despite the fact that big corporate food production is what is actually poisoning people. You see, that doesn’t count, and they are never held accountable, but if one of us were to do the same thing, we would be criminalized.

The big biochemical companies, the big seed companies, the big agrochemi-
Organizing at the Borders

The Border Agricultural Workers Project is changing the way the border looks and the lives of those who work near it.

In El Paso, Texas, just a few feet from the US-Mexico border, sits an unlikely 8,000 square foot building. It is the only building like it anywhere along the border—and not just physically.

What happens inside the building is more even more remarkable than where it is located.

The Border Agricultural Workers Center (CTAF) was established in February of 1995 as a physical space that would bring workers together to collectively reflect on their harsh realities and to organize not only for better working conditions, but to fundamentally change the industry that relies on them.

Before the opening of this center, the agricultural workers would sleep in the streets. Today, CTAF provides multiple services and support for the workers and their families.

The center offers education, health, rest and many other services, but its main function goes beyond offering social services and support that in reality only minimize the effects of poverty and exploitation.

The Sin Fronteras Organizing Project was founded on February of 1983 to initiate educational and organizing efforts among the agricultural workers of the border region in order to improve their working and living conditions.

Sin Fronteras was the result of organizing work initiated in 1980 by a handful of organizers who had arrived to the El Paso and southern New Mexico region and found the most deplorable conditions of poverty and exploitation, unlike on anywhere in the US.

The salaries of the agricultural workers in the El Paso and southern New Mexico region are the lowest in the nation. The annual salary of a agricultural worker is between $7,000 and $8,000, but in the border region it was less than $6,000 in 2006. In other words, the border agricultural workers are the worst paid and some of the poorest of all workers.

Low salaries are not the only problem border agricultural workers face. The list of difficulties is endless. There are about 15,000 farm workers in this region and the life expectancy of these workers is less than 53 years old. This exploitation and oppression inspired the formation of the Border Agricultural Workers Project, the organizing arm of Sin Fronteras, with the following mission: To promote and protect the human and civil rights of the agricultural workers, whether they be documented or undocumented and to work to help the agricultural workers develop and implement long range solutions to their social and economic problems.

Although the implications of the struggle for food sovereignty are of a global dimension, from the battle for a food system free of corporate control to the protection of nature to resolve the threat of climate change, for the Border Agricultural Workers Project, this is a movement that provides the opportunity and the strength to bring dignity to the lives of the farm workers and their families by struggling for social and economic justice.

— Carlos Marentes, executive director of Border Agricultural Workers Project, a RESIST grantee
Many Farms, One Movement
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cal companies—they pretty much control farm and food policy, not only in this country but everywhere in the world. They do this by basically running the world’s institutions—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and now even the United Nations.

There is a lot more persecution of people, a lot of human rights violations around the world. Someone who wants what you got—your land, and these governments and institutions are so corrupt, that your land is stolen and given to someone with money. These kinds of things are happening all over the world. The devastation of forests, Monsanto going into Mexico and promising poor farmers money if they will plant GMO corn. Mexico is the birthplace of corn and now it’s been contaminated. That’s a crime against humanity in my mind.

When these corporations kill people—it’s called the cost of doing business. They are never held accountable. No one, no government is holding these people accountable.

RESIST: How have these companies reacted to you all?

DH: They try to marginalize us, they try to say we don’t count. But actually, 70% of the world’s peoples are fed by peasant farmers. More than half of those farmers are women. People think that agriculture is only as it is in the global north.

Agriculture actually by and large is small. It is ecological, sustainable and local. They have markets that are right there in their community and are not exported—these are the kind of farmers that big companies say we cannot rely on and if we do, we’ll starve.

So they are pushing chemicals, GMO seeds, and they are causing terrible things to happen around the world—to biodiversity, to human beings, to the environment. But we are not going to let them define us. We know who we are and we know what we are doing and we know we are right and we know that they are wrong. We will continue to build another peasant base, sustainable, agro, economical farming model. And we will push sovereignty, which Via Campesina coined in 1996, so that everybody can produce and consume healthy and culturally appropriate food that is grown sustainably. And we can then can define our own food and agricultural policies and systems and not be dictated to by big corporations. We are just going to keep on doing what we are doing and spreading the word, and people are joining us.

We are not going to let them define us.

RESIST: You are a farmer, based in Montana, but this is a global movement. How do you view your role in the global context? What does this type of solidarity look like?

DH: People have had it harder in the global South and are actually more likely to take action. They are looking for some hope and are ready to take action against the people who oppress them. In this country we are so used to thinking the government would never let them do that to us—but they do. And farmers here are so hard pressed that it’s hard to know what is having a direct impact on them. I see my role as making funders understand how important it is to fund grassroots groups in this country that are part of international work. Everything that happens in this country—trade policy, agriculture policy, energy policy—has a huge impact on peasants and the ecosystem in the entire world. They’ll give money to Africa, South America, Asia, and funders in this country don’t see the big picture.

Everybody wants to live and make a living, with dignity, in peace—everybody in the whole world wants that. But when you have governments and multination corporations pitting bigger farmers against small farmers or saying that what’s happening with peasant farmers has nothing to do with us—that’s not true. We need to make the connections of agriculture in the US to agriculture everywhere—in Africa, Bolivia, South Korea.

We are all facing the same problems and the same enemies.

I’m trying to tell farmers that peasant is not a bad word. We are all peasants. If you are a peasant you are from the land, and of the land, and for the land.
Immigrant Rights and Agricultural Justice

Migrant Justice is connecting the issues in Vermont

After a year of farmworker ‘consultas,’ Migrant Justice launched a groundbreaking multi-issue campaign called “Immigrant Rights & Agricultural Justice” in 2012. Building upon the momentum of a big win in the fall, where Migrant Justice organized to create a new Vermont State Police Policy that explicitly directs police to not enforce immigration law, the campaign’s first priority is “Driving Towards Human Rights.” We’ve built an alliance of migrant farmworkers, farmers, and community allies to win unanimous support in the Vermont Senate and House to create a study committee that will introduce a bill in 2013 to create access for driver’s licenses in Vermont regardless of immigration status.

In this photo, farmworkers and allies hold “S-238” (the bill) license plates at a day of action at the State House in April. For the first time in history, Vermonters are standing shoulder to shoulder in the struggle for immigrant rights and agricultural justice.

-Brendan O’Neill, organizer at Migrant Justice, a RESIST grantee

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Donations are tax-deductible.
RESIST awards grants six times a year to groups across the United States who are organizing for social, economic and environmental justice. Below we list a few grant recipients from our most recent allocation cycle in February of 2012.

For more information, visit the RESIST website at www.resistinc.org

Beyond Toxics
1192 Lawrence Street, Eugene, OR 97401, www.oregontoxics.org

Beyond Toxics works to guarantee health and environmental protection for all Oregon communities and residents. Its strategies articulate the impact of pollution in a human rights framework as a means to demonstrate the paradigm of abrogating individual and community rights for the sake of corporate rights.

A RESIST emergency grant of $500 will enable Beyond Toxics to immediately oppose plans to transport coal by open rail car from Montana and Wyoming through Oregon communities for sale in overseas markets.

Centro de Trabajadores Unidos: Immigrant Worker’s Project
3200 E. 91st Street, Chicago, IL 60617, www.centrodetrabajadoresunidos.org

CTU was founded on the southeast side of Chicago in 2008 by immigrant workers, who were not willing to let the mistreatment they experienced continue.

They established CTU to ensure that labor abuses would not continue without workers uniting to organize.

RESIST’s grant of $4000 will enable CTU to continue their work to educate workers on their rights, develop leadership from within the community and organize workers to fight for their rights in the workplace.

The Prison Birth Project
P.O. Box 1253, Northampton, MA 01061, www.theprisonbirthproject.org

When the Women’s Correctional Center opened in Chicopee, Massachusetts in 2008, members of the Prison Birth Project understood that incarcerated women are not offered the reproductive options and support available to women on the outside. Since then the Prison Birth Project has offered support and advocacy on the inside from a trauma-informed perspective. A RESIST grant of $4,000 will enable the Prison Birth Project to continue providing women with doula support, personal advocacy, and organizing methods.

3rd Eye Youth Empowerment
28 Union Street, New Bedford, MA 02740, www.3rdeyeunlimited.com

Through a grassroots approach to youth organizing and leadership development, 3rd Eye Youth Empowerment empowers youth to change themselves and their community. 3rd Eye provides outlets where youth are able to express their vision for social change.

A RESIST $4,000 multiyear grant will enable 3rd Eye to continue working on youth-led organizing campaigns that utilize Hip Hop to inspire community members to take action.